



## **Political Controversy Nothing New to Washington**

By: Greg Simmons

January 16, 2006

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,181732,00.html>

Though Washington is in a huff over the antics of fallen lobbyist Jack Abramoff, 100 years ago, the investigation likely wouldn't have caught the notice of many in or outside of Congress, says Deputy House Historian Fred Beuttler.

Beuttler, who has tracked the slow march toward political accountability in terms of lobbying and the role of money in politics, told FOXNews.com that politicians embroiled in controversy is nothing new to Washington. It's only just recently been paid attention by lawmakers.

"Looking at the House now, looking at the Congress now, it's so much more above-board," Beuttler said in a one-on-one interview last week. "Back in the 19th century, none of this would be considered scandalous...The conditions have changed."

The changes to date, however, haven't gone far enough, said American Enterprise Institute scholar Norman Ornstein. He said that conditions now are strikingly similar to those in the late 1800's, when money paved the way to legislation, and lawmakers leveraged their influence for personal gain.

"It's a self-perpetuating system involving interests, members of Congress, people in the executive branch and patronage positions and so on," Ornstein told FOXNews.com.

Abramoff's latest travails arguably have disrupted Rep. Tom DeLay's political career, and the lobbyist's troubles certainly threaten other lawmakers. Players in Abramoff's money-for-influence scheme are facing prison time, and the dozens of lawmakers who have taken campaign contributions from Abramoff, his associates and clients are hanging on the Justice Department's every move.

Two weeks ago, Abramoff entered guilty pleas as part of an agreement to help the Justice Department continue investigating possible crimes linked to his lobbying efforts, which included bilking Indian tribes of millions of dollars; bending congressional ethics rules on travel and entertainment; and maintaining a seemingly open door with top Republicans,

including then-House Majority Leader DeLay. Throughout it all, money flowed like wine from Abramoff's clients to lawmakers' campaign accounts.

As a result, reform is at the tip of everyone's lips in Washington, D.C., and is even now being used for political gain.

"I've got a long record of ... reforming Congress, and I think we need more reforms to make sure that there's transparency in the relationship between those who lobby us and members themselves," Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio, told "FOX News Sunday." Boehner is one of three candidates seeking to replace DeLay.

"Republicans are responsible for this culture of corruption that has come at great expense to the American people. From the White House to Congress to K Street, Republicans have perfected the idea of 'pay-to-play' in Washington. Special interests have set the agenda for the last six years, and the American people have noticed," said Jim Manley, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., referring to the K Street in Washington that houses dozens of lobbying and law firms.

The Historical Summary of Conduct Cases in the House of Representatives, a 60-page chart of ethics investigations conducted by the House — the official history of congressional scandal — shows a gradually changing attitude over the mixing of money and politics — from nearly a laissez faire attitude two centuries ago to a much more complicated and restrictive one now.

For instance, the first entry in the chart shows a probe that had nothing to do with money. In 1798, Rep. Mathew Lyon of Vermont had to write a letter of apology to Rep. Roger Griswold of Connecticut after Lyons spit on his colleague. The letter apparently didn't go far enough because the next entry shows that Griswold assaulted Lyon with a "stout cane." Both members later made up, but not before Lyon tried to exact his revenge with a pair of fire tongs.

Sex scandals and even members killing other members in duels have marked some of Congress' less proud moments, Beuttler said, but throughout it all, paying for influence was basically standard operating procedure in the 1800's.

"One of the things that's interesting — looking back historically — is a lot of the financial issues weren't even" ethical issues, Beuttler said.

The first mention of lobbying in an ethics investigation didn't come until 1854, when a lobbyist allegedly sought to bribe lawmakers to extend the patent on the Colt revolver.

Even well into the 19th century, it was rare for money to be involved in ethics, Beuttler said. That changed in 1870, when one congressman was censured after selling cut-rate railroad stock to colleagues in an influence-peddling scandal named for the bank that was involved, Credit Mobilier.

Ornstein said the Credit Mobilier scandal tainted President Grant's administration. Eleven years later, President James Garfield was assassinated by an attorney who was angry that he didn't get paid off in the form of a patronage job after the election.

Only toward the middle to late 20th century has the influence of money in politics become a major subject of ethical discussion in Washington, he said, and lobbying wasn't even a target of the law until 1946, when Congress first required lobbyists to register under the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act.

Comprehensive lobbying and campaign finance changes didn't come until the 1970s, following more individual cases of abuse of power — putting spouses and girlfriends on the payroll, contract favoritism — and down Pennsylvania Ave., when President Nixon's Watergate break-in was paid for with campaign cash.

After the 1980s Abscam imbroglio, when FBI agents posing as Arab sheiks snared lawmakers in a bribery case, and later, the "Keating Five" savings and loan investigation into five senators' dealings with a failed bank, rules tightened and defined more clearly what is allowed and what's not between lobbyists and politicians.

One prime example of how drastically things have changed, Beuttler said, is the political defeat and then conviction of Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, D-Ill., after the House Post Office scandal of the early 1990s.

Beuttler said Rostenkowski, chairman of the influential House Ways and Means Committee, would give gifts to contributors in a fashion that didn't quite equal influence-peddling, and certainly wouldn't have met criminal standards earlier in the country's history. But his use of public money for private gain and then an attempted cover-up put him in federal prison on mail fraud charges.

"It seems like there's a scandal of this kind about once every generation," and the origins come "from law that is not as comprehensive as it should be, but it frankly comes, I think, in some sense from short memories," said Sen Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., last week as he announced a newly proposed reform bill in the wake of the Abramoff pleas.

Ornstein said despite reforms over the years, out-of-control lobbyists aren't the sole offenders when it comes to tales like Abramoff's.

"This is not just a one-way street," Ornstein said, claiming that he's heard stories of legislators and their staff members calling up lobbyists and asking for campaign contributions with the threat that if they don't pony up their bill won't go through, or worse yet, their clients might dry up.

"Lobbying is in the DNA of the political process ... and you're never going to get around human nature," Ornstein said. "So you can't legislate perfection here, but it's very clear that we've gotten lax, and there's an awful lot of money and politics in Washington."

With new boundaries and the impending periodic adjustment, maybe Washington can reach the point where a lawmakers' career is judged by legislative activity, not by campaign donations raised, Ornstein said.

Lieberman too said he believes the current round of reforms being offered around Capitol Hill should put Washington on the straight-and-narrow path — at least for the time being.

"My guess is that the impact of this scandal and these indictments and what may follow will make this — for the short term — a pretty pristine place to be."